

# **Panoche Hills North**

*CA-040-301A*

PANOCHIE HILLS NORTH WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CA-040-301A)

1. THE STUDY AREA — 6,631 acres

The Panoche Hills North WSA is located in the northwest portion of Fresno County. It is located within the Coast Range of central California, approximately 25 miles south of Los Banos. The WSA includes 6,631 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land (see Map 1 and Table 1).

The WSA is bounded on the north by a powerline, private land and a road, on the west by the Panoche access road and private land, and on the south and east by a livestock management road (which separates this unit from the Panoche Hills South WSA (CA-040-301B)).

The WSA is located just west of the San Joaquin Valley and includes steep rugged terrain accentuated by intermittent drainages. Elevations vary from approximately 800 to 2,600 feet above sea level. Vegetation within the WSA is primarily annual grasses and forbs interspersed with low-growing shrubs of the California Steppe ecosystem. A few junipers and yucca occur at higher elevations.

The WSA lies within the Panoche National Cooperative Land and Wildlife Management Area (NCLWMA) established on August 11, 1961 by Public Land Order No. 2460. The NCLWMA is cooperatively managed with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDF&G). The Panoche/Coalinga Rare, Threatened and Endangered (RTE) Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) overlaps the northwest portion of this WSA. Additionally, the northeast portion of the WSA was included in the Moreno Paleontological ACEC. Both ACECs were designated by the Hollister Resource Management Plan (RMP) in 1984. The former was established to protect RTE animals while the latter was to protect significant paleontological resources and sensitive plants.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Suitability recommendations were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Central California Study Areas. A summary of the area's wilderness values was included in the Final EIS. Two different suitability recommendations were analyzed in the EIS: all wilderness and no wilderness.

2.	<u>RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE</u> ---	0 acres recommended for wilderness
		6,631 BLM acres recommended for non-wilderness

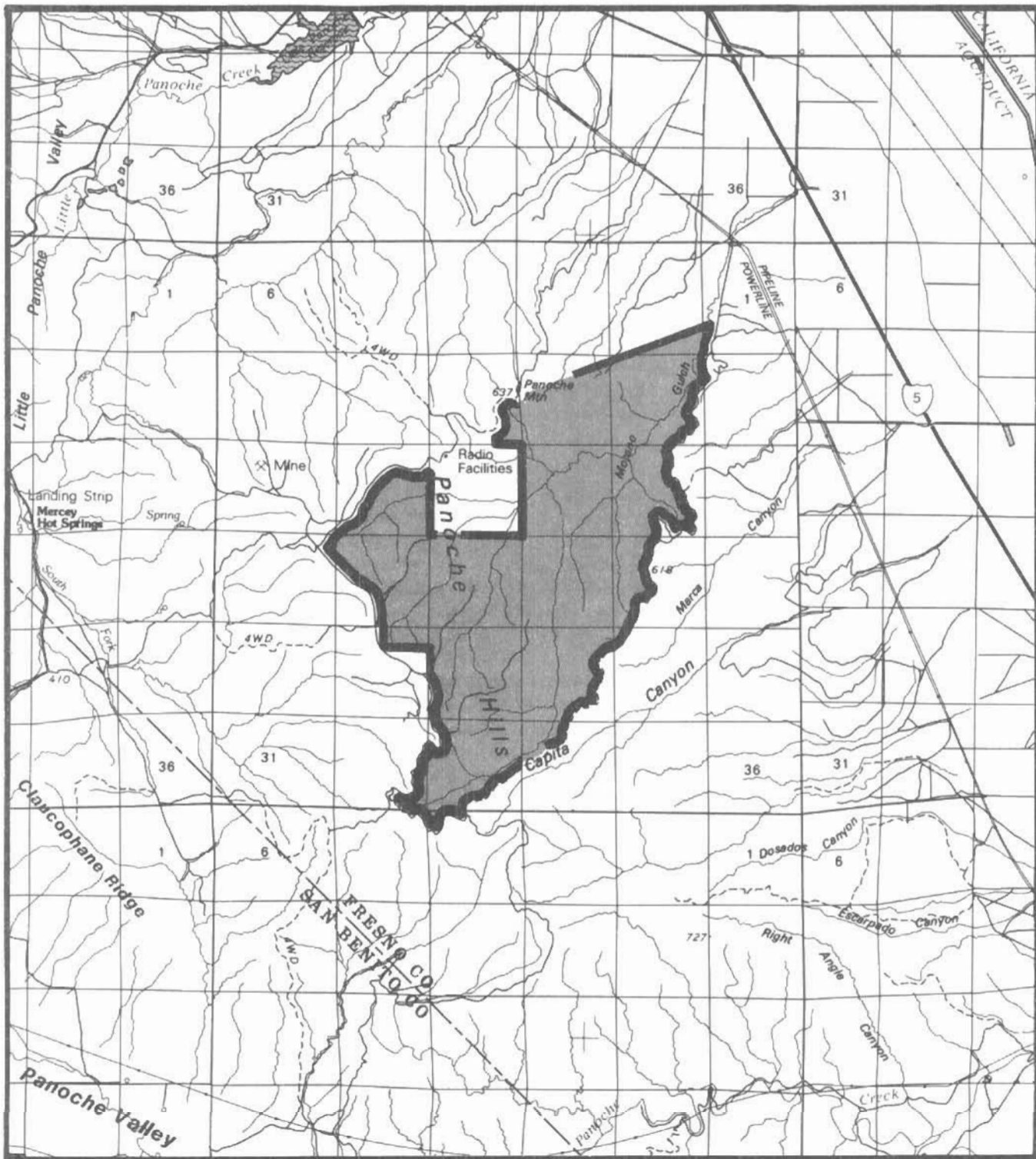
No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in the WSA is released for uses other than wilderness. The all-wilderness alternative is considered to be the environmentally preferred alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The no-wilderness alternative will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

The WSA is recommended non-suitable for the following reasons: the moderate potential for oil and gas exploration and development, the low potential for diatomite, gypsite, marl, phosphate and uranium mineral deposits, and the continuance of the Panoche NCLWMA, outweigh the area's wilderness values. Effective management of the area as wilderness would be difficult.


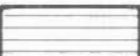

The WSA lends itself to other resource uses. Under the Bureau's recommendation this area will remain open for oil and gas exploration and development due to the moderate potential for the occurrence of oil and gas reserves in the WSA. In addition, the WSA has low potential for the occurrence of other mineral deposits mentioned above.

Being part of the Panoche NCLWMA, the area is managed by the BLM in cooperation with the CDF&G for the benefit of wildlife resources. Both agencies have been involved in water developments and silt catchment basins which have significantly improved the habitat for upland game species. Wilderness designation would constrain management options, including motorized vehicle access to install additional water developments and/or silt catchment basins.

The area's size combined with a lack of natural topographic barriers or cultural features to delineate the boundaries would make managing the area as wilderness difficult. Extensive signing, and in specific cases, fencing of the boundaries would be necessary. There are approximately seven miles of routes of travel including primitive ways and other unmaintained routes of access which will remain available for vehicle use.

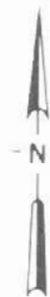


- |   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
|  | NONE | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS                  |
|  |      | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS               |
|  |      | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |

- |   |              |
|---|--------------|
|  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | STATE        |
|  | PRIVATE      |

**Panoche Hills North  
Proposal  
MAP-1**

0 1 2 3  
MILES



040-301A  
JUNE, 1988

TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,631
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
Total		6,631
<u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Study Boundary</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(within WSA)	0
BLM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness		0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
<u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,631
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		6,631

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The WSA has retained a high degree of natural character. The unit is characterized by steep, rugged terrain dissected by several deep drainages with slopes averaging 30 to 50 percent. Vegetation of the area is predominately Mediterranean annual grasses along with forbs and low shrubs, with juniper and yucca occurring at higher elevations.

The WSA remains relatively free from man's influence. Some OHV tracks and exploratory mining pits occur within the WSA. There are numerous improved springs, guzzlers and silt basins for wildlife enhancement located within the WSA. Most of these facilities are accessible by unimproved ways.

These improvements and ways do not detract from the naturalness of the WSA. Approximately one mile of road in the southwest portion of the WSA is excluded from the area by cherrystem.

2. Solitude: The rugged terrain, the steep canyons and associated drainages provide outstanding opportunities for solitude. This opportunity is less near the perimeter of the WSA due to roads, communication towers, and/or views of Interstate 5.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and unconfined recreation: The area provides good opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreational pursuits common to a grassland community in steep, rugged terrain. These include hunting, hiking, and bird-watching. Annual game bird populations vary greatly from year to year with hunting activity varying accordingly. Extreme daytime summer temperatures restrict recreational opportunities during the dry season.
4. Special features: Four Endangered or sensitive animal species - the San Joaquin kit fox, the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, the giant kangaroo rat, and the San Joaquin antelope squirrel occur in the area. An ACEC was established in the western portion of the WSA in 1984 to protect the habitat of these species. The northeast portion of the WSA is part of one of the richest and most important fossil areas in California, and was also designated an ACEC in 1984. This ACEC also contains suitable habitat for the green fiddleneck - a sensitive plant species. In addition, the area contains Mediterranean annual grasses and shrubs of the California Steppe ecosystem.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 6,631 acres of the California Grassland/California Steppe ecosystem. Wilderness designation of this WSA would add a new landform-ecosystem to the NWPS. The WSA's California Grassland Province, California Steppe landform-ecosystem, is not currently represented in the NWPS.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
California Grassland/ California Steppe	0	0	2	22,621
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
California Grassland/ California Steppe	0	0	2	22,621

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of 17 major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of these population centers.

Table 3 - Wilderness Opportunities for Residents of Major Population Centers

Population Centers	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>California</u>				
Bakersfield	32	4,071,358	128	3,998,548
Fresno	35	4,048,852	28	460,790
Los Angeles-				
Long Beach	27	2,876,234	135	4,958,751
Merced	33	3,957,550	25	348,753
Modesto	36	4,126,963	81	1,722,326
Oxnard-Ventura	23	2,195,198	85	2,703,260
Sacramento	46	5,001,817	87	2,479,541
Salinas-Seaside-				
Monterey	24	3,676,896	45	644,415
San Francisco-Oakland	39	4,473,002	39	565,614
San Jose	27	3,765,512	29	352,748
Santa Barbara-				
Santa Maria-Lompoc	20	1,166,142	35	528,590
Santa Cruz	27	3,765,512	32	407,890
Santa Rosa-Petaluma	10	888,579	12	134,167
Stockton	35	4,061,833	46	601,496
Vallejo-Napa-Fairfield	44	4,832,667	74	2,100,862
Visalia-Tulare-				
Porterville	34	4,431,635	61	1,681,921
Yuba City	44	4,951,805	85	2,459,500



3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The Pinnacles Contiguous is the only BLM WSA within 50 air miles recommended for partial-wilderness designation. The Pinnacles and the Ventana Wilderness Areas are located approximately 25 and 50 miles, respectively, southwest of the WSA. The former is managed by Pinnacles National Monument and the latter by the Los Padres National Forest.

C. Manageability

The Panoche Hills North WSA is manageable as wilderness, but only with difficulty. Manageability problems include the lack of natural barriers to vehicle use on existing ways and the size of the WSA. Although closed to motorcycle use since 1970, there continues to be some trespass use due to the ease of access into the area. Frequent signing, fencing and patrolling, along various segments of the border would be required to insure the integrity of the unit.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of information known at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendation: The geology and minerals potential of the Panoche Hills North WSA is described in a BLM report titled "Geology and Mineral Potential of the Panoche Hills, California" (L. Vredenberg, 1982). This data was used in the Affected Environment section of the Wilderness Recommendations Central California Study Areas Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) which is dated February 20, 1988.

The EIS states that there is potential for the occurrence of diatomite, gypsite, marl, phosphate and uranium. The EIS states that mineral development interest is low and that BLM records in July, 1986 showed one unpatented mining claim on the western boundary of the WSA. No material sale sites were present.

The EIS states that there was oil and gas leasing on nearly 70% of the WSA. There was historic drilling exploration for oil and gas within three miles of the eastern WSA boundary. Two producing oil fields exist near the WSA; i.e., the Vallecitos field ten miles to the south and the Cheney Ranch field eight miles to the east. A similar geologic setting was recognized in the northeast corner of the WSA. This



geologic environment was recognized as a possible source for petroleum. The EIS stated that the WSA has low potential for oil and gas. Marl was known to have been excavated to the west and gypsite to the east of the WSA. The EIS stated that there was low potential for these minerals.

2. Summary of significant new mineral resource data collected since the suitability recommendation, which should be considered in the final recommendation: Because this WSA was recommended nonsuitable by BLM in the EIS, no U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) or U.S. Bureau of Mines (BOM) mineral surveys were made for the Panoche Hills North WSA.

Based on new "confidential" information purchased from GeoMap Company in 1988, there has been a significant increase in the amount of data available to the BLM for this WSA. The new information is contained in a map titled "Structural Analysis of the San Joaquin Basin" (GeoMap, 1988 California Regional Base Map No. Cal-102 for the San Joaquin Basin).

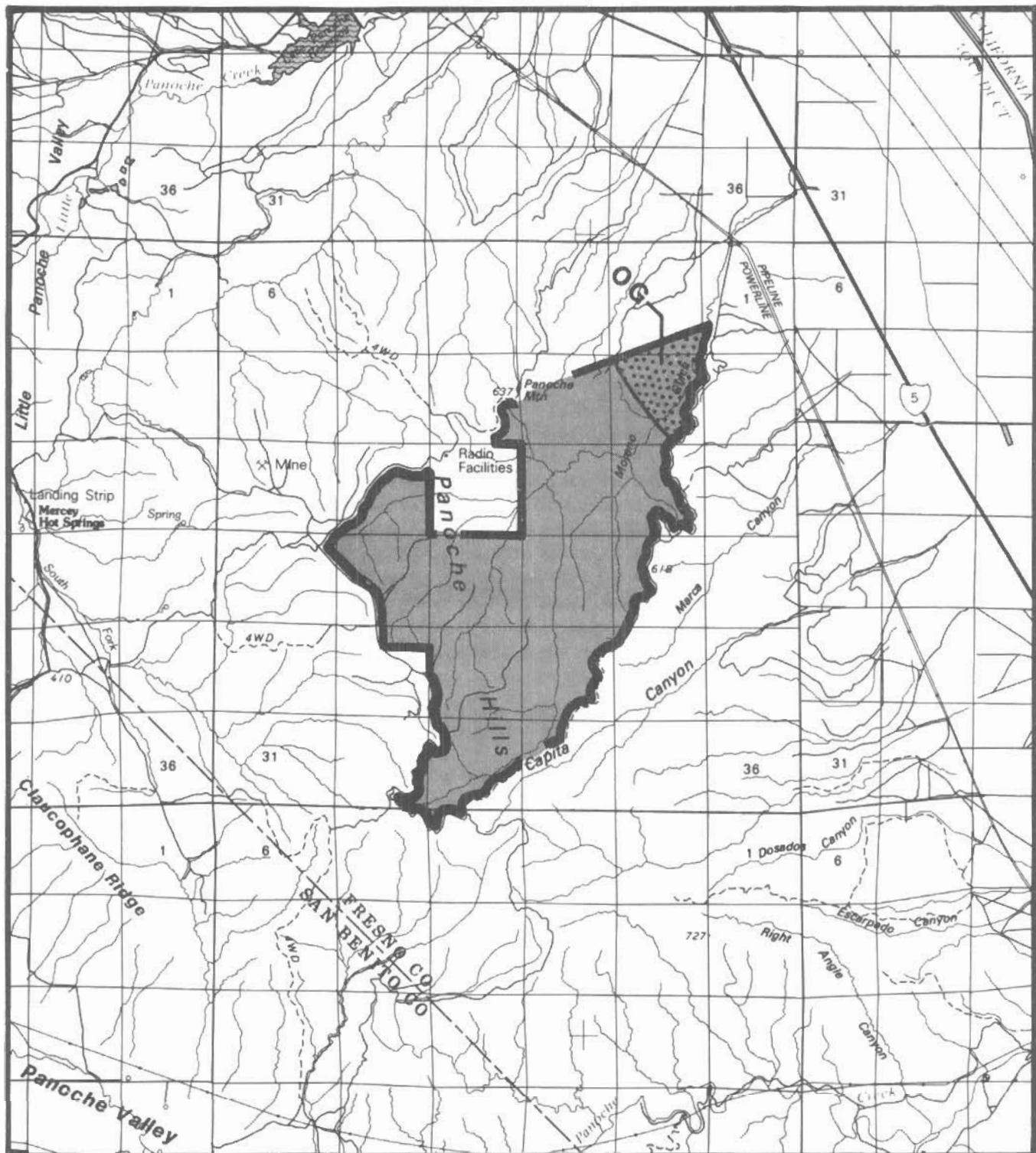
The data provided by this map, along with a more detailed investigation of both the surface and subsurface geologic data made by BLM geologist T. Moore in April, 1988, shows the existence of hydrocarbon deposits that have yet to be exploited.

Interest in mineral exploration is further indicated by BLM records dated March 25, 1988. These show two unpatented lode mining claims along the west-central border of the WSA. There are no oil or gas leases or applications in the WSA as of March 25, 1988 (Table 4).

Based upon the re-assessment of both new and existing data, a different mineral potential is assigned to portions of the Panoche Hills North WSA. There is moderate potential for hydrocarbons in the northeast corner of the WSA. All other mineral resources are still considered to be low as per the previous interpretations.

Table 4 - Mining Claims

TYPE	NO.			ACRES		
	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL
Mining Claims						
Lode	0	2	2	0	40	40
Placer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mill Sites	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	2	2	0	40	40





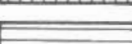



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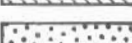
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R 10 E R 11 E

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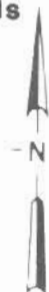
	Recommended for Wilderness
	Recommended for Non Wilderness
	Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
	Split Estate
	State
	Private

#### Explanation

	High Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
	Moderate Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
<b>M</b>	Moderate Mineral Potential Location in a High Mineral Potential Area
<b>H</b>	High Mineral Potential Location in a Moderate Mineral Potential Area

#### Commodity Symbols

**OG** Oil & Gas



### Panoche Hills North Mineral Resource Potential



Map-2  
040-301A

E. Impacts on Resources

The following table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all alternatives considered including designation or non-designation of the entire areas as wilderness. (For a full explanation of this summary, refer to the Central California Study Areas - Wilderness Final Environmental Impact.)

Table 5 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impact on Wilderness Values	There will be a minor, adverse impact on the area's wilderness values on approximately 15 percent of the WSA as a result of the noise and surface disturbance associated with the exploration of the area's oil and gas resources and continued vehicle use.	There would be a minor positive impact on the area's wilderness values as a result of closing the WSA to motorized recreation use and oil and gas exploration.
Impact on Motorized Hunting Use Levels	Motorized hunting use will continue and will increase from the current 250 visitor days annually to under 325 visitor-days.	Motorized hunting use would be foregone eliminating 250 visitor-days annually. Adverse impacts would be minimal as similar opportunities are available on other public lands within the region.
Impact on Paleontological Resources	There will be no impact on the area's paleontological resources.	Impacts would be the same as for the Proposed Action.
Impact on Rare, Threatened and Endangered Species	The area's Rare, Threatened and Endangered species will be negligibly impacted as a result of the noise and surface disturbance associated with continued four-wheeled vehicle use, oil and gas exploration, and mechanized fire suppression.	There would be a slight positive impact on the area's Rare, Threatened and Endangered plant and animal species as a result of eliminating the noise and surface disturbance associated with motorized vehicle use and oil and gas exploration.

Table 5 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impact on Oil and Gas Exploration and Development	There will be no impact on oil and gas exploration. How- ever, the potential for oil and gas is low.*	Oil and gas exploration and development would be foregone on the entire WSA.

\*Since this impact was identified in the Central California Study area final EIS, it has been determined that the oil and gas potential is moderate in the eastern portion of the WSA.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local or economic considerations were identified in the Final EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Several comments were received in the inventory phase dealing with mineral and wildlife values in the WSA and with the proximity of roads (including Interstate 5) as adverse influences outside the unit.

A public hearing was held in Fresno, California. During the public hearing and the comment period, a total of 57 comments were received, both oral and written, related specifically to this unit. Nine comments supported the Bureau's no-wilderness alternative. Forty-eight comments supported the all-wilderness alternative.

The Resources Agency of California favored wilderness designation due to the protection it would give to endangered species and paleontological resources and due to non-representation of the California Steppe ecosystem in the NWPS. The agency did not consider OHV trespass as a valid justification for recommending the area as non-suitable for wilderness designation. No Federal, County, or Congressional comments specific to this WSA were received.